



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Introduction: Ex-centric Modernisms

Citation for published version:

Creasy, M & Thomson, A 2013, 'Introduction: Ex-centric Modernisms', *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 157-162. <https://doi.org/10.3366/mod.2013.0058>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.3366/mod.2013.0058](https://doi.org/10.3366/mod.2013.0058)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Modernist Cultures

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Creasy, M., & Thomson, A. (2013). Ex-Centric Modernisms. Modernist Cultures.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Introduction: Ex-centric Modernisms

Matthew Creasy and Alex Thomson

[W]e find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Homi Bhabha's assertion from 1994 seems to have been borne out by subsequent developments within modernist studies. The spatial and chronological boundaries of those studies have been pushed to bursting point, and the two categories also intertwine in ever more complex ways. Bhabha points to the inextricable political dimension of our thinking about the relationship between space and time. Raised explicitly and repeatedly in both modernist art and its subsequent criticism, this may be one of the reasons for the continued currency of a term such as modernism, which had once seemed to be outmoded in the demand that we get beyond or 'post' modernism.

Under the heading 'Ex-centric Modernisms' this special issue brings together a range of essays, all of which use comparative perspectives to explore these crossings of time, space, and inclusion. Modernist studies have long connected aesthetic invention with geographical displacement, representing a specific group of European cities as the crucibles of innovation and alienation from national traditions, allied to the experience of the modern cosmopolis as the background for artistic radicalism. Recently, however, this view has been questioned. It has been suggested that it was not the specific passage from country to city, but the experience of modernisation itself

Modernist Cultures 8.2 (2013): 157–162

DOI: 10.3366/mod.2013.0058

© Edinburgh University Press

www.euppublishing.com/mod

which was at stake, and that the same transformations might also be felt in the regions that had been left behind by economic and social development. Following such key works as Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992), the editors of the pioneering collection *Locations of Literary Modernism* argue not just for the local colouring of key modernist works, but also identify the power of that sense of the peripheral or provincial in the forging of artistic innovation.¹

The next step is to advance understanding of modernism beyond the alternatives of centre or periphery, metropolis or region, in order to situate both sides of the debate within a sense of the unfolding of a larger dynamic system in which economic, social, and cultural categories all play their part. Progress here has been mixed. Under the editorship of Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, the recent *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010), for example, makes repeated reference to the concept of uneven development. While this gesture allows for geographical variation in the take-up of modernist styles, it also risks a pre-emptive and totalising identification of world history with its modernist destiny; individual critics are left to fill in the details of how and when this should come to pass.² Uneven development is a theoretical concept in the purest sense: it imagines the variousness of culture as the rumpled surface of a single historical fabric. Positing the remorseless economic logic of capitalism as the motor of history, it derives creative expression from the crackle and friction between different temporal energies. Spatial and temporal categories are given similarly powerful synthetic articulation in Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* (2004), in which the centrality of Paris to the modern artistic imagination is enshrined as the only fixed point in the entire wheeling world-system.³ We have travelled a long way to find out that the centre lies just where we had always been told it did.

The ex-centric reconstruction of literary history represented in this special issue of *Modernist Cultures* begins by acknowledging the potential for contradiction within the demands of aesthetic and historical reading. Both forms of reading invoke stylistic categories, generic conventions, historical and social expectations and pressures, but aesthetic criticism asks us to seek what is unique and individuated in the artwork, and to eye with suspicion the historian's search for larger patterns of significance. As critics, most of us (most of the time) seek to juggle both roles. We accept the necessity of a certain degree of interpretive violence, and find forms for our stories about art which slacken this tension. Franco Moretti describes comparative literary history as 'a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures'.⁴ But the idea of national literary history has

always been comparative, whether this has been openly acknowledged or not; the search for cohesive political identity has always authorised attempts to privilege the identity of a tradition through time over the different waves of transnational stylistic influence. To think ex-centrally is to look for alternative tropes which might elude and frustrate the most powerful of our modern political narratives. Among other things, it is to treat a city as a node in a cultural or economic network, to assert regional coherence based on linguistic or social connections which challenge national boundaries drawn by later generations, and to emphasise the plasticity of styles and restlessness of experiments which travel furtively and without passports.⁵

Arising from two panels on European Modernisms at the inaugural joint conference of the Scottish Network of Modernist Studies and the British Association of Modernist Studies at the University of Glasgow in 2010, this special issue looks at the ways our understanding of European modernisms might be reconfigured in the light of models of history that attempt to take a more pluralist, or decentred, approach. In pursuing ex-centric models, we have been inspired by the work of the late Professor Susan Manning, one of the conference's keynote speakers, to whose memory this volume is dedicated. Susan's work broke new ground in comparative literary study through her focus on questions of style, not as the product of geographical or cultural location, but as indicating grammatical or figurative relations between texts that a comparative approach dependent on the metaphorical forms of genealogy and temporal succession could not accommodate. In *Fragments of Union* she characterises her approach in the following terms: 'moving away from the traditionally influence-led methodologies of comparative literary studies, the present argument works through more associative and analogical models of comparison initially derived from the structuring principles of the Scottish and American texts themselves'.⁶ Her work demonstrates a practical and writerly negotiation between the twin demands of text and context, form and history, that is alert to the totalising gesture by which romantic and national literary history elides the historiographical hesitations she traced in eighteenth-century thought. In doing so, her work may offer resources to think the study of modernism beyond the shared romantic inheritance of both modernist artists and their critical interpreters.

The opening essay of this special issue reproduces Jean-Michel Rabaté's keynote paper from the 2010 conference. Taking the date 1910 as a fixed point, his paper reads a range of works from across Europe, looking for the pattern which emerges when we suspend

our expectations that literary history be organised by succession, development, and descent. Rabaté argues for an understanding of modernism as primarily a question of ethical rather than formal innovation. The texts Rabaté surveys show that the founding impulse for many modernist writers is the ethical desire to change human character. The struggle with form is always in the service of the struggle to redefine human life itself. Rabaté laces together a sequence of images: the Wandering Jew, the solitary writer, the prostitute and the pimp, the jewel thief. Within the isolation and struggle of these figures he discerns a common idea of moral and spiritual renewal, which he compares to the Unanismo of Jules Romain. This, Rabaté argues, required ironic detachment from political and social divisions, a feeling for the unity of humanity and the courage to invent the new.

Ken Hirschkop's paper returns us to Paris, one of the traditional capitals of modernist studies. Like Rabaté, however, he is concerned with the ways in which modernism needs to be considered as a disruption of traditional historicist thinking; here, the attempt to break with our received conceptions of the link between history, territory, and language. Hirschkop begins with a point of spatial connection—the presence in Paris of both Saussure and Benjamin at formative points in their intellectual development—to explore their parallel attempts to release our ideas about language from the linear developmental logics of nineteenth-century philology. The experience of life in the metropolis, Hirschkop argues, offers Benjamin and Saussure a model of dynamic human collectivity in a pure form prior to its canalisation into histories and nations. Paris is similarly central to Marius Hentea's account of the formative influence of his Romanian upbringing on Tristan Tzara. Through detailed discussion of the cultural and social background to his earliest writings, Hentea shows that even before his arrival in Paris in 1919, Tzara's thinking was shaped by the fierce debates over the influence of French culture in his native Romania. If Romanian intellectual culture in the later nineteenth century was so dominated by France as to make it virtually a colony, by the turn of the century the pressure for cultural modernisation was being countered by a conservative revival of native traditions, and, as in Britain, Paris was being charged with corruption.

Both Hirschkop and Hentea show the difficulty of evading the pull of the metropolis in the writing of literary history, but Peter Sjølyst-Jackson's essay suggests a crucial qualification to mapping the culture of the period in relation to the forces exerted by a single cultural centre. Copenhagen also functioned as a central node in publishing and literary networks, connecting Scandinavia

to the German-speaking world. Drawing on Franco Moretti's use of spatial and serial thinking to disrupt the powerful presence of narrative succession as a groundwork for comparative literary history, he argues for the comparative belatedness of British modernism, through compelling readings of texts by Strindberg and Hamsun. For Sjølyst-Jackson, their modernism is a reactionary expression of the friction between traditional societies and the new conditions of modernity. Belatedness is also a keynote of Alex Thomson's contribution. In showing how Hugh MacDiarmid—the central figure of Scottish modernism—has to counter his own sense of national belatedness *vis-à-vis* European modernism, in ways that parallel those of his English avant-garde counterpart Wyndham Lewis, Thomson suggests that national culture will always be constituted through a debate over the possibility of its own relative belatedness. He argues that Lewis and MacDiarmid both share in the same cultural struggle to shed the mantle of complacent nineteenth-century Victorian imperial liberalism. Although apparently taking distinct national forms, their texts are not best understood as the resurgence of distinct national traditions: again, thinking comparatively helps contest the figures of descent.

Sascha Bru's essay begins a project of rethinking the temporal politics of the avant-garde, challenging the futurist paradigm presumed by Thomson's paper. Rather than seeing the avant-garde primarily in terms of futurism, he argues, we should rethink it in terms of what François Hartog calls a 'presentist mode'. Drawing on examples from across Europe and Russia, Bru argues that the avant-garde work is not, as is often assumed, primarily directed towards the destruction of the present and the invention of the new. What is new in the avant-garde, he shows, is that it refuses an idea of time oriented to the passage from past to future, and attempts to give form and force to the experience of the present as a radical experience of possibility, neither delivered over to the reception of a legacy from the past nor sacrificed in the struggle for the future. Bru develops this further by contrasting the avant-garde's challenge to the public politics of history thought in terms of time, memory, and community with modernism's retreat from public time to the experience of the fullness and disjunction of the private sense of time. The avant-garde, he implies, continues to offer us models for resistance to the ways social regimes of public time, propped up by the apparatuses of chronology, are internalised. Finally, Jo Winning's essay takes us on another modernist journey, tracing the hitherto neglected life of Djuna Barnes's lover Thelma Wood, from St. Louis to Paris to Berlin,

and then back to New York. Winning's essay shows that Wood is worthy of study as an artist in her own right, arguing for the presence in her work of a distinctive lesbian aesthetics of the line. Corresponding with the other approaches showcased in this issue, Winning demonstrates that Wood's transatlantic crossings place her centrally within what we have called ex-centric modernisms, which are characterised by nomadic trajectories, the exploitation of decentred and transnational cultural networks, and the shock of the contact between tradition and modernity.

Notes

1. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, 'Introduction: Locating Modernisms: An Overview', in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, eds. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 3–32.
2. Susan Stanford Friedman's 'Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies', *modernism/modernity* 17.3 (2010): 471–99, might be said to explore the endpoint of such a trajectory.
3. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
4. Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 148–62, p. 162.
5. For discussion of the first two points see Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon, 'Re-thinking Literary History: Comparatively', *ACLS Occasional Papers* 27 (1994), http://archives.acls.org/op/27_Rethinking_Literary_History.htm (Accessed 16 February 2013). See also Linda Hutcheon, 'Rethinking the National Model', in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, eds. Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3–49. On transnationalism and style see Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
6. Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 4.